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Belarus: Treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses by the state and the general population and the availability of state protection (2002-2005)

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Although freedom of religion is enshrined in the Belarusian Constitution, the Government "restricts this right in practice" (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2). In 2002 the Government adopted a "highly repressive" religion law that, while recognizing the central role of the Russian (Belarusian) Orthodox Church (*FSU Monitor* 1 Nov. 2002; AP 9 Aug. 2002; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2) and the historical importance of "traditional faiths" in Belarusian society (*ibid.*), places restrictions on minority religious communities (*FSU Monitor* 1 Nov. 2002; Freedom House July 2005, 73). The Belarusian government has identified these "traditional faiths" as Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism, Sunni Islam, and Evangelical Lutheranism (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2).

The religion law imposes strict limitations on religious organizations that have been operating in Belarus for fewer than twenty years (*ibid.*; US May 2005; AP 9 Aug. 2002), including restrictions on publishing literature, establishing missions, and holding organized prayer (*ibid.*). As the Jehovah's Witnesses were unable to register as a religious organization during the Soviet era, the religious group does not have registration dating back twenty years (*FSU Monitor* 1 Nov. 2002).

There are reports that non-Orthodox religious groups and denominations experience "harassment" (ICC Nov. 2005) and "persecut[ion]" by the authorities (HRW 14 Jan. 2003). In 2005, the Brest region's top religious affairs official produced a report stating that more needed to be done by local authorities in terms of "break[ing] up worship services and harassing, fining and controlling religious activity" of non-Orthodox religious groups (Forum 18 18 Nov. 2005). The Jehovah's Witnesses were highlighted in the report as a group whose activities needed to be better controlled by the authorities (*ibid.*).

The Belarus Ministry of Education has approved school textbooks containing "discriminatory" language against various religious groups, including the Jehovah's Witnesses (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2; Forum 18 24 June 2003). In 2003, religious groups in Belarus protested a school textbook entitled *Man in the World of Culture*, which describes Jehovah's Witnesses and other "non-traditional" religious groups as "sects" and their religious activity as a "breeding-ground for fanaticism" (*ibid.*). In 2005, a religious group protested the language used in another schoolbook, *Basics on Home and Personal Security*, in which several religious groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, are referred to as "sects" (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2). The book includes a chapter entitled "Beware of the Sects" (*ibid.*).

According to a 2002 newsletter of the Center for Religious Freedom, the Jehovah's Witnesses were among seventy-four "destructive sects" identified by the Belarusian military press (Freedom House 4 Sept. 2002). In the same year, an International League for Human Rights Update reported that local authorities had placed blame on Jehovah's Witnesses for the arson of an Adventist Church in the city of Polotsk (ILHR May 2002), although the Adventists believed Orthodox extremists to be responsible for the fire (*ibid.*).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral Source: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Canada, branch office of the Office of Public Information of Jehovah's Witnesses, was unable to provide additional information on the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses in Belarus nor on the availability of state protection to them.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International (AI), Charter 97, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, European Country of Origin Information Network (ECOI), Factiva, IRB databases, Minority Rights Group International (MRG), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Prima News Agency, World News Connection.

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